

West, they were given the final signal, with even a loyal billionaire being forced to turn over his business to the state. The tycoons once known as powerful oligarchs were now the vassals of Putin's Kremlin, their every move closely followed, most of their telephones bugged. The collection of *kompromat* to keep them on a tight leash had become big business for law enforcement. Many tycoons sought to stay in Putin's favour by carrying out tasks for him. 'These are cats that like to bring dead mice to the Kremlin,' said Mark Galeotti, an expert in Putin's influence operations at the Institute of International Relations in Prague.<sup>166</sup> They needed Putin's approval to get ahead in business, and also to survive attacks from law enforcement and rival oligarchs. 'All of them depend on the number one,' said a close associate of one billionaire. 'Russia is the main place they make money, and they all depend on the nod from the number one for that.'<sup>167</sup>

They had become part of a feudal system in which Putin's role as the ultimate arbiter between rivals fighting for business was the source of his power. Almost any deal above a certain level – some said over \$50 million – required Putin's approval to go ahead, although one senior Western banker said that sometimes he intervened in deals worth less than that: 'What absolutely floored me is that Putin got involved in a deal in the \$20 million range.' That particular case involved a businessman who wanted to sell up and leave the country. 'But he was told he wasn't going anywhere, and had to keep his company,' said the banker.<sup>168</sup> Under such a system, it is not difficult to imagine Russian businessmen volunteering to cultivate foreign politicians on the Kremlin's behalf, in return for Putin's nod for a piece of land or a development licence, or merely to stay out of jail.

And it was a system where, especially after the annexation of Crimea, Putin's men had given a clear signal about where they wanted things to go. 'The idea is very clear,' said one senior Russian businessman. 'The West is going to destroy Russia because we are Orthodox . . . We have reserves that they want to take from us. We have the most talented sportsmen, artists and ballerinas, and we are envied. We have the most advanced people, the most intelligent. By now each part of the machinery deals with its own business, and the machine works by itself. Everyone does what they can.'<sup>169</sup>

Putin and his KGB men had gone far. The networks created on the eve of the Soviet collapse to funnel assets into the West had been preserved, and filled with new cash. The alleged organised-crime associates like Boris Birshtein were still active and within reach, while the ostensibly more respectable businessmen who'd followed them, like Shalva Tchigirinsky, were also still deeply aligned with the Russian state. If, for a brief period under Yeltsin, there had been a risk that some of these networks might spin out of control, under Putin the security services had reasserted their primacy. In Tchigirinsky's case, for instance, Putin's security men had a hold over him. His brother Alexander remained in Moscow after Tchigirinsky left Russia again following the 2008 financial crisis. Tchigirinsky told everyone that he was in exile, and that he no longer spoke with his brother, with whom he had fallen out. But he showed me a set of messages they'd recently exchanged, which included photos of the retirement ceremony of a senior Moscow city official which Alexander had attended, and Alexander's property business depended almost entirely on maintaining good relations with the Kremlin.<sup>170</sup> The black-cash networks laid down so long ago through Mogilevich and his associates, through the Solntsevskaya, and through Sam Kislin, Tamir Sapir, Aras Agalarov and Tchigirinsky were still being deployed. Such security service networks, said Thomas Graham, the director for Russia on the US National Security Council under George W. Bush, 'are never abandoned. They always remain in place.'<sup>171</sup>

Even beyond this network of Moscow money men that had expanded to include the new generation from Brighton Beach (Sater and Dvoskin), Putin had developed other levers of influence. There was Dmitry Rybolovlev, the fertiliser tycoon who overpaid for Donald Trump's Palm Beach mansion. There was Roman Abramovich, the former oil magnate who in recent years had switched his focus from London to New York, where his second wife (until their August 2017 divorce) bought a brownstone mansion and they wined and dined Trump's daughter Ivanka, her husband Jared Kushner and his brother. 'I know Putin sent Abramovich there to continue the influence campaign,' said one former close associate.<sup>172</sup> Then there was Viktor Vekselberg, the mandarin-like head of the Skolkovo high-tech hub